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CICERO THE STYLIST: AN APPRECIATION¹

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The tendency to underestimate Cicero is not a phenomenon of our own generation alone. Among the critics of Roman times, as well as among the critics of today, there have been those who have felt in him too little of substance and heat, too much of verbal exuberance.

Without the least desire to ignore or to distract attention from the real defects of the style of Cicero, I wish to present one or two reasons why we should not allow ourselves to be swept from our feet by these criticisms, which, because of their assemblage and emphasis in certain manuals much venerated, and with good right, by students of Roman literature, have come to be of the nature of a fashion—too much so for the comfort of either the lover of Cicero or the lover of justice. And yet, my purpose is not so much to render unto the orator the things that are his—for this has already been done with great thoroughness more than once, and recently—as to restore, or preserve, or beget the proper balance of mind in those students or teachers of Cicero whose faith may have been impaired, or in whom faith has not yet really been born.

Conceding, first of all, with Cicero's greatest admirer in antiquity, that we are not to look for perfection in any man,² let us examine into the nature of Ciceronian style. This will bring directly to our attention both the virtues which are claimed

¹ Read before the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, Cincinnati, April, 1912.

² Quint. x. 1. 24: *Neque id statim legenti persuasum sit, omnia quae optimi auctores dixerint utique esse perfecta. Nam et labuntur aliquando et oneri cedunt, et indulgent ingeniorum suorum voluptati, nec semper intendunt animum, nonnumquam fatigantur; cum Ciceroni dormire interim Demosthenes, Horatio vero etiam Homerus ipse videatur. Cf. xii. 1. 22: . . . nec Cicero Bruto Calvoque, qui certe compositionem illius etiam apud ipsum reprehendunt.*

for it and the vices which are charged against it. It will also demonstrate—what is of great moment in the formation of a final estimate—that the vices and virtues of Ciceronianism are often identical, and that mere prejudice, or slight variation of temperament in the critic, may serve to render the virtue into a vice, or to make of the vice a virtue.

Our inquiry must really be, then, as to whether the charges against Ciceronianism are valid in the greater degree, or only in the less.

Perhaps it will conduce to an easier grasp of the nature of Cicero's art if I select what seems to me the quality which embraces most of its virtues, and about it as a center construct my appreciation.

This quality is simply a marvelous fluency. Whether in oration, essay, or formal epistle, Ciceronian eloquence is a full-flowing, unceasing current. It streams—smoothly, steadily, reposefully.

By fluency, too, I mean not only fluency of language, but fluency of thought. There is fluent thinking, as well as fluent writing or speaking. There is thinking which streams easily and continuously, and there is thinking which leaps, or halts, or strays and loses time in getting back again, or never gets back. Cicero's thought is copious, continuous, logical. His mental processes are easy-running. There are no breaks, no jolts; there is no getting lost. When we are led aside from the main path, it is with full consciousness that the path is still there, and that we are soon to return to it.

Now the virtue of fluent thought is that it is clear and easily followed. Further, that which is clear and easily followed is not always duly credited with depth. Cicero has not escaped the charge of superficiality. Is the charge well founded?

When we think of the philosophical essays, of the many rich *loci communes* imbedded in the orations, or of the compression of Plato's whole doctrine of the immortality of the soul into a few lines of *De Senectute*, we are not disposed to facile acceptance of this criticism. However, even granted that Cicero's thought does seem to lie on the surface, we may ask, in turn, What constitutes depth? Anyone may easily call to mind, for example, thinkers

in the religious life of the past century who seemed to the onlooker of their day to drop their plummets down the broad, deep universe, and find no bottom; yet their doctrines are clear enough now, and the expressions of the average religious journal of today make them appear even conservative. We have adopted their thought and are familiar with it. The preacher who should deliver the content of their sermons today would arouse no excitement, and would probably be called platitudinous. And besides, there is often a confusion of depth of thought with thought only partially expressed. Omit to express a link here and there in the logical process, and it is conceivable that the reader will think you are deep, when, as a matter of fact, you are only careless, lazy, or stupid. The deepest thought is but the final link in a long, logical chain. Take time, let every successive link be traced, and a natural and easy progress brings you to the end—granting, of course, the possession of the experience necessary to comprehension.

But this brings us back to language. Ciceronian fluency of thought finds a perfect medium of expression in Ciceronian fluency of language. The full, streaming, logical process is clothed in full, streaming, verbal dress. All is clearness, limpidity, ease. *Ce qui n'est pas éclair, n'est pas de Cicéron.* Few writers so effectively conserve the energy of the reader by leading him gently and noiselessly and effortlessly from the beginning to the end of his thought. There are no haltings, no leaps and jerks, no lacunae or ellipses. All is amplitude and fulness. Cicero does not scruple to use all the words he needs. The epigrammatic comparison of him with Demosthenes by Quintilian is more reliable than most epigrams. "From the one you can take nothing away, to the other you can add nothing."¹

As might be expected, such fulness invites the charge of redundancy. Let us examine this charge also.

It may, indeed, be conceded that many a word could be omitted from Cicero's orations without very appreciably interfering with the sense. The orator's delight in fulness leads him to employ pairs of words and phrases where the second member balances the first, and often seems merely to repeat it. In most cases,

¹ *Inst. Or.* x. 1. 106.

however, a little examination will show that expressions which are apparently synonymous are not so in reality. Cicero's method here is not repetition, but amplification, and the result is a sense of richness and abundance of resource. Such phrases as the following are not examples of tautology: *caste integreque; singulari eximiaque virtute; bellum grave et periculosum; animos excitare atque inflammare; laboribus et periculis; clari et magni; qui aut videbunt vestrum monumentum aut audient; sententiis nostris consultiisque; maerorem atque luctum*.¹ The repetition of idea is only partial. The risk of redundancy is worth running for the sake of the harmony of the language and the sense of equipoise in the thought. Pairs like this may be compared to two circles which slightly intersect each other; there is common ground, but the areas are by no means identical. They are, indeed, often entirely separate, but there is always a balance of thought and sound.

So also when Cicero employs a series of words—*consilio, auctoritate, sententia; credulos, obliviosos, dissolutos; mente, ratione, cogitatione; inconstantia, levitate, mobilitate*. We might, to be sure, omit some of these terms and not fail to be understood. Sometimes, it may be conceded, we should be glad to omit; but not often, and then, perhaps, not wisely—for the question of harmony and rhythm is also to be considered, and sentiment. Think, for example, of the rich vowel and consonantal harmonies, of the rhythmical quality, and of the fitness of language to content in the following sentence: *Horae quidem cedunt et dies et menses et anni, nec praeteritum tempus umquam revertitur, nec quid sequatur sciri potest*. To the simple-primrose kind of people, it would have been perhaps just as satisfying had Cicero merely said: *tempus fugit et numquam revertitur*; yet how lame and unconvincing an expression of the sense of long-continued passage of time and the impossibility of its recall as compared with the elegant, ample, and reposeful sentence of the stylist.

When there occurs actual repetition of words, there is, of course, no question of tautology, for this is one of the ordinary factors in

¹ These examples and some of those which follow were collected by Miss Frances W. Durbrow, University of Wisconsin, 1910, and used in her excellent Bachelor's thesis on *The Style of Cicero*.

rhetorical art. *Unum sentitis omnes, unum studetis. . . . Quem umquam iste ordo patronum adoptavit? Si quemquam, debuit me. Sed me omitto. Quem censorem? Quem imperatorem?* No apology is necessary for this kind of repetition.

But the most effective of all of Cicero's devices for fluency is to be seen in his use of the connective. "In literature," says Balzac, "the art lies entirely in the gracefulness of the transitions." This is exaggeration, of course, but it contains a great principle of style. Cicero is master of the art of graceful transition. Nothing can be more admirable than the skill and ease with which one sentence is made to follow another. All the fine variety of Latin conjunctions and relative pronouns and adverbs is pressed into service with unequalled dexterity. Almost any page of any work shows it. *Enim, quamquam, enim, et tamen, quarum, autem, enim, etsi, sed, quidem, igitur, sed, autem, apud quem, qui si, sed, enim*, is the array that makes the first paragraphs of *De Senectute* flow; some of them adversative, some continuative, some relative, some stronger, and some weaker, and all serving to gather up and present in review before the mind, so to speak, the contents of the sentence or clause immediately preceding before going on to the next. Examine the following paragraph. What a wealth of words, what easy connection, and what fluency and fulness as a result! About one word in five is not strictly necessary, yet not a word in the passage is actually superfluous.

(Hoc) *enim* onere, quod mihi (commune) tecum est, (aut iam) urgentis aut (certe) adventantis senectutis (et) te et me (etiam ipsum) levare volo; *etsi* te (*quidem*) id (modice et) sapienter (sic) ut omnia (et) ferre et laturum esse (certo) scio. *Sed* (mihi), cum de senectute vellem aliquid scribere, (tu) occurrebas dignus (eo) munere quo uterque (nostrum communiter) uteretur. Mihi (*quidem*) ita iucunda (huius) libri confectio fuit, ut non modo (omnes) absterserit senectutis molestias, sed effecerit (mollem etiam et) iucundam senectutem. Numquam *igitur* (digne) satis laudari philosophia poterit, *cui* qui pareat omne tempus aetatis sine molestia possit degere.¹

The continuity and fulness of Cicero's language are second only to the continuity and fulness of his thought.

Again, Cicero's language is not only full and fluent, but painstaking and pure. Language is, after all, so imperfect a medium,

¹ *De Senec.* 2. The italics indicate connection, and the parentheses inclose words not strictly necessary.

and so dependent for efficiency upon the attention and experience of the auditor and reader, that the loss of thought in greater or less measure during transit is inevitable. Yet the loss may be reduced to a negligible amount, and in Cicero it is so reduced. His language conveys to us what he thinks—not more, and not less.

There are great differences possible in this respect. Most writers of our own day, and perhaps most writers of antiquity—certainly most writers of today, and most speakers—appear to be content with the use of such language as will enable the reader or listener to understand if he brings good-will to the task. The crying literary sin of the generation is looseness and mediocrity—excused and encouraged by manuals of English which seem to justify any usage if it is only susceptible of psychological explanation, by dictionaries which permit spelling according to the taste of the individual, by reform boards which refuse all authority to tradition, by a press which is in constant feverish hurry and whose sole refinement is in the direction of piquancy, by successful so-called literary men who have gone far toward drowning literature and the taste for literature in a flood of journalism, by a public sentiment which resents any mode of expression superior to its own, by an educational system which permits the employment of illiterates to expound its theories, to superintend its teachers, and to give instruction in its schools.

There is a vast difference between language which allows you to understand and language which compels you to understand, whether you will or not; yet the conception of this difference may be said practically not to exist. I heard a modern novelist of some fame state in a public lecture that he regarded form and style as not half so important as content. This is, of course, not meant to be an exhortation to looseness, but it has that practical effect. Why should a college student be inspired to strive for refinement of style when a financially successful literary man attaches slight importance to it? No wonder our undergraduates are surprised and indignant when we point out to them that what they really have written is not necessarily what they think they have written.

This fulness and fluency and absolute perspicuity in Cicero

must share with his clear and fluent logical processes something of the responsibility of having invited the charge of superficiality. But here again we must be on our guard. Almost any thought which is poorly expressed is obscure, and obscurity, in that it does not yield to vision, shares to some extent the character of depth. You may look into a certain river-source in Florida that is sixty feet deep and see bottom with utter distinctness; and again, you may look almost any day into a puddle only three inches deep whose bottom is utterly indistinguishable. It all depends upon the medium. Many a writer has a reputation for depth who is only muddy—intellectually, stylistically, or both. There is probably not a person in this presence who does not stand in awe of a German presentation more than of an English, French or an Italian presentation, though it may contain only the same knowledge, or even less. I myself plead guilty to an instinctive tendency to bow down before a German note—in some sort, at least, a melancholy survival of the days when I spent so many virtuous hours interpreting German commentaries by the aid of the Greek and Latin texts they were meant to illuminate.

But fulness of thought and language and gracefulness of transition are not the only qualities which make for fluency. Words are chosen by the stylist not for their meaning alone, but for the charm of their vowel and consonantal qualities, and for their rhythmical composition. The modern ear is more or less unappreciative of the magic of harmonious sound in prose—at least, it is not often consciously appreciative, but euphony is, nevertheless, a factor which is to be taken into account.

There is even yet, once in a while, a stylist who is conscious of the spell of harmonious and rhythmical diction. Let us listen to one or two of them.

One of them is an Englishman.

Each phrase of each sentence, [says Robert Louis Stevenson¹] like an air or recitative in music, should be so artfully compounded out of long and short, out of accented and unaccented, as to gratify the sensual ear. And of this the ear is the sole judge. It is impossible to lay down laws. . . . Each phrase in literature is built of sounds, as each phrase in music consists of notes.

¹ *Contemp. Rev.*, 1885.

One sound suggests, echoes, demands, and harmonizes with another; and the art of rightly using these concordances is the final art of literature. . . . We begin to see now what an intricate affair is any perfect passage; how many faculties, whether of taste or pure reason, must be held upon the stretch to make it; and why, when it is made, it should afford so complete a pleasure.

The other is a Spaniard.

Here comes a period [says Valdés of prose style, in *Semblanzas Literarias*¹], ample, polished, and sonorous, of the kind that the pseudo-classicist is always seeking without knowing what he is after; after that, another, short and palpitating as the heart that dictates it. Here appears one, gentle and honeyed, like the love-making compliment of a youth, and then, at full speed there rises after it another, dry and harsh, that cuts it short. Prose, in a word, hates monotony like death, and takes pains to demonstrate the fact on every possible occasion. Perhaps this is why it rarely rises to the sky. The sky is charming, but it is monotonous. . . . Prose, too, is not absolutely without rhythm. Its rhythm is much more deep and mystical than that of metrical language, but, for all that, it is not without existence. A delicate ear perceives it as the bland and hidden music from within a dark forest. Who would venture to deny rhythm, number, and harmony to the prose of Cervantes, Fénelon, or Manzoni? I would not be the one to assume such responsibility. The fact is, that the rhythm of prose is not uniform and continuous like that of verse. The winds of thought agitate it at their caprice, and cause it to vary its direction at every instant, without ever allowing it a point of repose. Prose, better than verse, obeys the insinuations of the spirit, obediently allowing itself like a feather, to be raised, sometimes to regions serene and tranquil, and again to be wafted through places intricate and obscure.

It is not ours to realize in all fulness the harmonies of a language which has ceased to be a living medium of expression. That they were there, and that they were assiduously and lovingly cultivated, there is no doubt. We know it from Cicero's own references to choice of words, and, still more, from his employment of ample and sonorous expression.

Who has failed to be struck with the abundance of superlatives in the orations?

Vestram virtutem, iustitiam, fidem, mihi credite, is maxime probabit, qui in iudiciis legendis optimum et sapientissimum et fortissimum quemque elegit.²

. . . . Omnis exterarum gentium potentissimorumque populorum, omnis clarissimorum regum res gestas cum tuis nec contentionum magnitudine nec numero proeliorum nec varietate regionum nec celeritate conficiendi nec

¹ Pp. 380, 382.

² *Pro. Mil.*, 105.

dissimilitudine bellorum posse conferri, nec vero disiunctissimas terras citius passibus cuiusquam potuisse peragrari, etc.¹

The superlative is resonant as well as emphatic, and its frequency is probably due as much to the former quality as to the latter.

The gerund and gerundive constructions, too—with what evident fondness the orator employs them, for the same reason:

Omnia sunt excitanda tibi, C. Caesar, uni, quae iacere sentis, belli ipsius impetu, quod necesse fuit, perculsa atque prostrata: constituenda iudicia, revocanda fides, comprimendae libidines, propaganda suboles, omnia quae dilapsa iam diffluerunt, severis legibus vincienda sunt.²

. Nisi P. Servilio, clarissimo viro, respondendum putarem, qui hunc honorem statuae nemini tribuendum censuit nisi ei qui ferro esset in legatione interfectus: ego autem, patres conscripti, sic interpretor sensisse maiores nostros, ut causam mortis censuerint, non genus esse quaerendum.³

But there is another harmony than that of the sonorous word. There is rhythm. In spite of Zielinski, Laurand, and others, I am not yet convinced that a prose rhythm susceptible of analysis occurs in Cicero; but this much is certain: that his ear was sensitive to the rhythm of sentence-endings, and that he was conscious of the art of rhythm, and—in part consciously, in part unconsciously—used it. When he finds fault with Demosthenes, who for him excels in every kind of eloquence, it is in terms which strongly suggest how his judgment of oratory is based in great part on its appeal to the ear: *qui quamquam unus eminet omnes in omni genere dicendi, tamen non semper implet auris meas; ita avidae et capaces et semper aliquid immensum infinitumque desiderant*.⁴ It is not improbable that a study of the style of our best modern speakers and writers would reveal the same sensitiveness of ear, and even the same avoidance of certain unrhythmical combinations—though in a less degree; for the conscious element in Cicero is large.

For, in spite of the natural gift which is manifest on every page, we must not think of Cicero as unstudied. I once heard Ignatius Donnelly say that there was a difference between the handwriting

¹ *Pro Marcell.*, 5.

Phil. ix, 3.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ *Or.* 104.

of the man who was used to the pen and that of the man who wrote with his tongue out. What he said of handwriting may be said also of style. No one is farther than Cicero from the appearance of being labored. We naturally think of his work as effortless. Yet some of the best prose in the world has been the product of as much pains as verse itself, and prose successes have been hardly more frequent than successes in poetry. Pitfalls beset the ready writer.

You write with ease to show your breeding,
But easy writing 's curst hard reading,

wrote Sheridan. When we remember the severe training to which Cicero subjected himself, the translation and retranslation of Greek and Latin authors during his practice in composition and declamation; his emphatic assertion that the stilus is the *effector ac magister dicendi*; the fact that the style of his letters ranges from the conversational to the polite and literary—we shall not be too quick to conclude that Cicero wrote without effort. However great his instinct for language, writing and speaking were with him an art. He would have agreed with Horace that talent and cultivation should go hand in hand, just as he agrees with Horace that wisdom is the source of all good writing—*dicendi facultatem ex intimis sapientiae fontibus fluere*.¹

The essential characteristic of Ciceronianism, then, is fluency—fluency of mental process, and fluency of expression secured by fulness of vocabulary, grace of transition, sonorous sound, and rhythmical movement. The style of Cicero is an easily gliding stream, calm and noiseless, but sweeping and powerful.

Easily gliding streams might be monotonous, however. The Ciceronian stream is not. Here and there the smooth and sweeping current narrows and deepens, and surges between the rocks in the noisy rapids of the passionate invective or the still more passionate appeal to patriotism. Here, it expands again into the broad and placid pools of the *loci communes*. Here, the surface breaks in the ripples of vivacity and wit. Even its broadest reaches are dimpled with the eddies of variety. It is neither

¹ Quint. xii. 2. 6: Hinc etiam illud est, quod Cicero pluribus et libris et epistolis testatur, dicendi facultatem ex intimis sapientiae fontibus fluere.

Asian nor Attic, but each in turn, and both together—or, rather, neither of them; for perfect oratory belongs consistently to itself. Cicero's oratory, like his philosophy, is eclectic. His style belongs to no school; it represents the selection and assimilation of the best qualities in both schools by a nature well tuned to the harmonies of thought and sound. As the philosophy which he formed for himself out of his wide study of the Greek systems was an individual philosophy of action, so the result of his patient study of Greek oratory was a living product belonging all to himself. He is a Phidias or a Raphael of style—facile, abundant, inspired; not without fault, but summing up the excellences of the times that begot him.

The fact is that neither in ancient nor in modern times have the fountains been wholly pure from which the words of Cicero's adverse critics flow.

The motives of the ancient critic may be estimated from what is told us by Quintilian and Tacitus. The former says, referring to Cicero:

Whom, nevertheless, men of his own time dared to assail with the charge of being tumid, Asiatic, redundant, too fond of repetition, sometimes frigid in his wit, and in composition scrappy, jingling, and—far be it from the truth—almost too soft for real vigor. . . . Especially did those press upon him who were eager to seem imitators of the Attic orators. This clique, as though initiated into certain religious mysteries, assailed him as an alien-born, so to speak, who would not bow down in awe before their precepts, and refused to be bound by them.¹

Again, in the *Dialogus*, of the same generation and by a pupil of Quintilian, we read:

Of course you have read the letters of Calvus and Brutus to Cicero. From them it is easy to understand that to Cicero, Calvus seemed bloodless and arid, and to Brutus leisurely and disjointed; and, in turn, that Calvus gave Cicero a bad name for being loose and sinewless, and that Brutus, to use his own words, charged him with being, so to speak, broken and limping.²

The criticisms of Fronto and the *Elocutio Novella* enthusiasts, who, with a freakish desire for originality, and with freakish devotion to a freakish theory of style, sought the golden days of

¹ Quint. xii. 10. 12-14.

² Tac. *Dial.* 18.

style in the time long before Cicero, we may pass over without comment.¹

It is plain, of course, that this ancient criticism is, for the most part, the detraction of the Atticists, and that they are employing the stock objections of the Atticists to Asianism. With the narrow partisanship of the school, they take no account of the fact that Cicero is no mere Asiatic, but an eclectic whose style is compounded of the best elements of more than one school, and invest him with all of the faults with which their enemy, Asianism, is commonly charged. Just how much of their criticism is due to rhetorical allegiance, and how much to actual and sincere taste, we may not measure. Both were there; but we may sum up their attitude thus: they *would* not sympathize with the Ciceronian ideal, and they *could* not.

With modern criticism the case is somewhat different. It is not wholly without significance that those who lead in the condemnation of both Ciceronian style and content belong to a nation which has achieved an unenviable reputation for the laborious use of language and the obscure presentation of the results both of learning and speculation, and that Cicero's most eloquent defenders, aside from the author of *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte*, are French and Italian.

But it is not only the Teuton who lifts his voice against Cicero, or gladly hears his critics. We have not only an ethnological factor in the disparagement of Ciceronianism, but a chronological factor. The modern finds it somewhat easier to criticize Cicero for the reason that our times attribute less importance than the ancients to the spoken word, and even to the written word. Even the Frenchman sympathizes with the spirit of an age which, through long suffering from the abuse of words, has come to despise the art of speech, and is impatient with the mere idea of it. Said Fénelon: "L'homme digne d'être écouté est celui qui ne se sert de la parole que pour la pensée."² The very names of rhetoric, oratory, elocution, and declamation are in bad repute. Our college courses now are in "English" and "public speaking" instead of in rhetoric

¹ Schanz, *Rom. Lit.*, III, 102.

² *Lettre à l'Académie*, chap. 4.

and elocution, just as pedagogy has sought new respectability under the guise of "education."

That the reaction against the rhetorical has elements of health, of course no one would think of denying. It is equally clear, however, that the modern ear is dull to the art of the spoken word, and that the modern tongue disparages an art to which it cannot attain.

And now we may complete our epigram, remembering, of course, the reputation of the epigram for general unwillingness to spoil good sentences for the sake of the truth: the ancient critic *would* not, and *could* not, sympathize with the Ciceronian ideal; the modern critic *cannot*, and *will not*.

To conclude: whether we are enthusiastic admirers of Cicero or not is in part a matter of temperament, and in part a matter of real and familiar acquaintance with him—and, though I have been considering only Cicero the stylist, the same may be said of the man. If we are possessed of a strong sense of art, we shall see in him one of the world's few masters of the written and spoken word. If we are of plain, matter-of-fact, brachycephalic temperament, we shall probably not rise to the heights of greatest enthusiasm over his work, or that of any other orator or essayist whose eloquence depends largely upon style; but we should in that case move cautiously, giving heed to Quintilian's sensible admonition: "In pronouncing judgment on great men like these, we should be modest and circumspect, lest we condemn what we do not understand—a thing which often happens."¹

¹ x. 1. 26: Modesto tamen et circumspecto iudicio de tantis viris pronuntiandum est, ne, quod plerisque accidit, damnent quae non intellegunt.